

CHAPTER 17

THE NARRATIVE SELF

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If the person sitting next to you on a long plane trip suddenly launches into the story of his life you may be amused, or annoyed, or simply glad for the distraction. Whatever your reaction, you are unlikely to be *surprised* that he has a story to tell. The idea that our lives are in some sense story-like runs deep in our everyday thought. This idea has also been widely explored in more formal academic studies of the self. While there is broad (but by no means universal) assent to the view that the self is narrative in form, there is little consensus on just what this means or what implications it has.

This chapter investigates the narrative approach to self found in philosophy and related disciplines. The first section provides a provisional picture of the content of the narrative approach. This approach is not monolithic, but includes views that use different conceptions of narrative in different ways to illuminate different aspects of the self. This section provides overviews of some of these views. The second section highlights significant commonalities and differences among the views described in section 1, seeking to get clear both on the wide range of narrative views and on the commonalities that define the approach as a whole. The third section considers some important objections that have been raised to the narrative approach and what the responses to these objections reveal about this approach. Each section will provide further insight into the fundamental claims of the narrative approach as well as uncovering outstanding questions and pointing to directions for future development.

1. THE VIEWS

Narrative views of the self all draw some kind of link between narrative and selfhood, but the links drawn vary widely. In this section we consider some of the most commonly held and important conceptions of the connection between narrative and self. I divide these into two basic categories, but this is a somewhat tentative distinction. As the discussion develops we will see that there are important differences between views within the same categories and important similarities that cross categorical boundaries. It is also important to be clear that the views described here do not exhaust the space of existing narrative views. This section should thus be taken as providing an overall feel for the range of claims that are made about the relation between narrative and self rather than as providing a firm and complete taxonomy of existing narrative views.

Selves are constituted by narratives

Perhaps the most basic kind of narrative view, and the one that draws the strongest connection between narrative and self, holds that selves are inherently narrative entities. There are usually two elements of this claim. One is that our *sense of self* must be narrative, the other that the *lives* of selves are narrative in structure. These two elements are not considered to be completely distinct, but seen rather as two sides of the same coin. Selves, on this view, are beings who *lead* their lives rather than merely having a history, and leading the life of a self is taken inherently to involve understanding one's life as a narrative and enacting the narrative one sees as one's life.

This kind of claim is seen in three of the philosophers most readily associated with the narrative approach—Alisdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and Paul Ricoeur.¹ Although these theorists differ from each other, they also overlap in many significant respects. I will call the kind of narrative view they hold the 'hermeneutical' narrative view because it conceives of selves as fundamentally self-interpreting beings and because its proponents are inspired by hermeneutics theory. The basic features of the hermeneutical view are most easily explicated by looking at the strong connections it draws between selfhood, narrative, and agency. Selves are fundamentally agents on this view, and agency requires narrative. To be agents we must be intelligible to ourselves and to others; our actions must be meaningful and significant in a way that cannot be captured in purely naturalistic terms, but requires that we interpret our behaviors in the context of a narrative.

¹ Psychologist Jerome Bruner (e.g. Bruner 1990) and philosopher Anthony Rudd (2007) provide other examples of this approach.

This insight is perhaps expressed most directly by MacIntyre. He points out that a particular behavior might be characterized with 'equal truth and appropriateness' as digging, gardening, taking exercise, preparing for winter, or pleasing one's wife (MacIntyre 1984: 206). In order to say what an agent is doing when he displays this behavior, we need to understand how these different answers are related to one another and which one captures the agent's primary intentions. To know this we need to be able to place the behavior in the context of intersecting stories—stories about households and domestic arrangements, about the cycles of the seasons, about gardening and the story of the actor's life. 'Intentions', MacIntyre says, 'need to be ordered both causally and temporally and both orderings will make references to settings' (1984: 208). This ordering is a narrative, and so 'narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human action' (MacIntyre 1984: 208). To identify an occurrence as an action, he says, is to 'identify it under a type of description which enables us to see that occurrence as flowing intelligibly from a human agent's intentions, motives, passions, and purposes' (1984: 209), that is, to tell a narrative that explains it. This narrative account of action must, moreover, have certain characteristics. To be intelligible, action must be aimed at some end or *telos*. This requires that narrative explanation include a normative or evaluative dimension which, according to MacIntyre, applies not just to individual actions but to our lives as a whole. To *lead* a life is to search for and aim toward the good. 'The unity of a human life', he therefore concludes, 'is the unity of a narrative quest' (1984: 219).

Taylor offers similar analysis arguing against a particular kind of naturalistic or reductionist view that implies that our lives can be lived without any particular relation to a tradition or to the good. To the contrary, he claims, selfhood and the good 'turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes' (Taylor 1989: 3). As did MacIntyre, Taylor concludes that this intertwining means that the self must be narrative in form. He endorses MacIntyre's characterization of human life as a quest, and describes the specific nature of this quest in terms of 'frameworks', background traditions which define the fundamental terms by which we evaluate our lives and our world. A framework 'incorporates a crucial set of qualitative distinctions' and provides the sense that some action or way of life is 'incomparably higher than the others which are more readily available to us' (Taylor 1989: 19). For Taylor, as for MacIntyre, the intelligibility of action requires that our lives be narrative in form.

Ricoeur's view falls into this same general category by suggesting that our lives must be narrative in form if we are to make sense of human agency. It is, however, an extremely intricate view, and differs from MacIntyre's and Taylor's in many important details which I will not be able to recount here. I limit myself to noting one salient difference flagged by Ricoeur himself. While Ricoeur, like Taylor, endorses MacIntyre's view of our lives as a quest narrative, he is keen to emphasize discontinuities between life and literature in a way that MacIntyre does not

(Ricoeur 1994: 158–63). This difference turns out to be one that makes a difference, and I will discuss it in more detail later.

The hermeneutical views are not the only views that see selves as inherently narrative in form. An extremely famous narrative view quite different from the ones just discussed is found in Daniel Dennett's account of the self as a 'center of narrative gravity'. For Dennett, the self is a fiction, but a useful fiction, like the notion of a center of gravity as it occurs in physics. There is no such *thing* as a center of gravity, Dennett says, 'but it is a fiction that has a nicely defined, well delineated, and well behaved role within physics' (1992: 103). This is because it can be used to explain and predict and to manipulate objects; it is a fiction that does work. The self, he says, has similar ontological status. Selves, as he conceives them, are characters in the narratives we humans spin. Key to Dennett's view is the distinction he draws between the entity that generates an autobiographical narrative and the protagonist depicted within it. Though Melville begins *Moby Dick* 'Call me Ishmael' we would be making a mistake to think that we are supposed to call *Melville* Ishmael. Melville is the author of the narrative; Ishmael is a character within it. Selves are, Dennett says, relevantly like Ishmael. Human brains are narrative-generating machines and selves are the protagonists of the narratives they generate.

Neither the narrating brain nor the human organism within which it operates—both of which are real things—are selves on Dennett's view; they are Melville to the self's Ishmael. We tend to conflate the two because the narratives our brains spin generally depict the movements of the human being from which they emanate. Nevertheless it remains a mistake, Dennett says, to identify the author of a narrative with its protagonist. To show this he tells a story of his own involving a 'novel-writing machine'—a computer that generates novels. Suppose this machine spits out a novel that begins 'Call me Gilbert' and takes the form of an autobiography of someone named Gilbert. Gilbert is the protagonist of this story, but there is no temptation to say that Gilbert, the subject of the autobiography, is actually the clanking computer sitting on the table.

But now suppose, Dennett continues, that we put this machine into a robot on wheels with a television eye. It begins its novel 'Call me Gilbert' and creates a narrative with the form of an autobiography, but this autobiography incorporates the information coming in through the television eye so that soon 'we will be unable to ignore the fact that the fictional career of the fictional Gilbert bears an interesting resemblance to the "career" of this mere robot moving through the world' (Dennett 1992: 108). Nevertheless, Dennett argues, we will still not be tempted to think that the machine has become a self just by being placed into a mobile robot (he stipulates that the machine is not conscious). Gilbert is not the robot; Gilbert is still a fictional protagonist in a story spun by a machine. Similarly, our brains are narrative-generating machines but they are not selves; brains don't *know* anything. For this reason, he says, 'it is a category mistake to start looking

around for [selves] in the brain' (Dennett 1992: 109). He bolsters this argument by looking at cases of Multiple Personality Disorder, which he glosses as a circumstance in which a single brain generates multiple, non-intersecting narratives, each of which has its own protagonist, none of whom can be exclusively identified with the narrating human.

For Dennett, the self is constituted through human narration just as it is for the hermeneutical theorists, but there are important differences as well. Dennett's idea of narrative does not necessarily involve any strong form of evaluation or a quest for the good; it is more a matter of keeping track of the history of the body in which the narrating brain resides. Rather than constituting ourselves as selves as the hermeneutical view has it, in Dennett's view the brain constitutes a fictional protagonist by telling a story. On the former view, there are genuine human selves whose self-conception and mode of life constitute their selfhood; on the latter there are no such things.

I have also defended a view of the self as narrative in form—'The Narrative Self-Constitution View' (NSCV) (Schechtman 1996). It is in some ways in-between the hermeneutical view and Dennett's. The NSCV says that we constitute ourselves as selves by understanding our lives as narrative in form and living accordingly. This view does not demand that we explicitly formulate our narratives (although we should be able, for the most part, to articulate them locally when appropriate) but rather that we experience and interpret our present experiences not as isolated moments but as part of an ongoing story. The experience of winning the lottery will, for instance, be a different experience for someone immensely wealthy, someone who has lived a life of crushing poverty, and someone who has struggled unsuccessfully with a gambling addiction. The difference is the difference in the background narrative against which winning is interpreted. Having a narrative, and so being a self, on this view is primarily a matter of keeping track of this background and responding accordingly. The NSCV is like the hermeneutical view, then, in that it sees the self as real and constituted by a narrative. It is more like Dennett's, however, in that it does not emphasize agency so strongly as the hermeneutical view does, nor does it insist on an overall ethical orientation or thematic unity to the life of a self.

Selfhood and narrative capacity

The views we considered above see selves as the protagonists of human-generated narratives; characters in the stories we spin. Another kind of narrative view links selfhood to the capacity to think in narrative terms and to offer narrative explanations. These views differ from the ones just considered in that they do not require a narrative of one's whole life. They do not focus on the *story* of a life, identifying the self with a character in that story, but rather on the fact that selves employ the kind of logic found in stories when they describe, explain, and choose their own behavior.

Views of this kind are found frequently in developmental and evolutionary psychology. In this context the mastery of basic narrative competency is taken to be an important developmental milestone. Narrative ability allows us to understand ourselves as extended over time and to draw more robust distinctions between self and other. It also supports the development of autobiographical memory and contributes to a host of the complicated cognitive capacities that are characteristic of human selves. An example of this kind of view from the perspective of evolutionary psychology can be found in the work of Merlin Donald (1991, 2001). Here I will concentrate on an example from developmental psychology by looking at the work of Katherine Nelson.

Nelson explores 'the hypothesis of a new level of consciousness that emerges in early childhood together with a new sense of self situated in time and in multiple social realities' (Nelson 2003: 17). She describes the increasingly complex kinds of self-awareness that can be identified during the normal development of a human infant and sees the emergence of a 'new subjective level of conscious awareness, with a sense of a specific past and awareness of a possible future, as well as with new insight into the consciousness of other people' that develops in the late preschool years (Nelson 2003: 33). This level of consciousness is linked to the development of the ability to tell simple narratives about one's life, and so she finds a 'close connection between narrative and the emergence of a specifically human level of consciousness' (Nelson 2003: 22).

Nelson's idea is that as children enter into language they learn, with the help of their caregivers, to narrate the events in their lives. At first this involves nothing much more than describing things that happened to them in sequence and offering rudimentary evaluations (e.g. 'Mommy and I went to visit Daddy at work in a big building. We looked out a high window. It was fun.'). At the beginning even these very basic narrations require a great deal of prompting and reminding from adults. Gradually, however, children learn to do this work themselves, and when they do they enjoy qualitatively new kinds of experiences and are able to participate in new forms of social interaction. Nelson describes the dramatic transformation this brings about: 'This level of self understanding integrates action and consciousness into a whole self, and establishes a self-history as unique to the self, differentiated from others' experiential histories. . . . [I]t adds . . . a new awareness of self in past and future experiences and the contrast of that self to others' narratives of their past and future experiences' (Nelson 2003: 7).

Nelson's view is, in many ways, continuous with some of the views described in the previous section. Like the views described above Nelson's focuses on the importance of self-conception in the constitution of selfhood and the way in which a narrative sense of self is crucial to selfhood. While the narratives she sees as marking our entrance into selfhood are quite rudimentary and local, the idea is that ultimately we will come to think of ourselves as persisting individuals with a single life story. Moreover, even these very basic narratives include some measure of

evaluation. One way of thinking about the difference between the views described earlier and views like Nelson's is in terms of the specific questions they ask. The former take adult human selves with the full complement of human-specific capacities and seek to define what is required to be such a self. Evolutionary and developmental psychologists, on the other hand, are interested in the emergence of self and the threshold that must be crossed in order for full-blown selfhood to begin to develop. These theorists thus investigate the basic cognitive accomplishments that initiate this development.

Another example of a view that links self to narrative capacity is David Velleman's view of the self as narrator. Velleman's view is developed as a reply to Dennett, arguing that Dennett's thought experiment does not, when properly interpreted, show what he says it does. Velleman accepts the basic outlines of Dennett's account of the making of the self through narrative, but believes that if we follow this account to its logical conclusion we will see that the self that emerges from the narrative activity of the human brain is real and not fictional. To make this point, Velleman returns to Dennett's story about the narrating robot who weaves the story of Gilbert. In Dennett's case, you will recall, the narrative of Gilbert follows events in the history of the robot—for example, if the robot gets locked in a supply closet, the narrative will involve Gilbert having been locked in the supply closet. Velleman rightly points out that if this kind of connection can be formed retrospectively, there is no reason to think that it cannot be formed prospectively. A narrating machine that can notice that the robot in which it sits was locked in a closet and thereafter generate 'I went into the closet and was locked in there' should be able to generate 'I am going to the closet' and then alter the path of the robot so that it does so.

Dennett does not describe his robot in this way but, as Velleman points out, he does attribute this capacity to human brains in his discussion of Multiple Personality Disorder. In discussing the case made famous in the book *Sybil* Dennett describes the patient as generating multiple narratives and says she 'engaged the world' with the self whose narrative was active. Presumably this means that Sybil lived as her narration suggested rather than simply narrating what had already been lived. 'If a self-narrator works in both directions,' Velleman concludes, 'then the self he invents is not just an idle fiction, a useful abstraction for interpreting his behavior. It—or more precisely his representation of it—is a determinant of the very behavior that it's useful for interpreting' (Velleman 2006: 212). According to Velleman, this ability ultimately makes the narrator an agent. The narrator's pronouncements about what will happen next give him *reasons* to follow the course he has announced. In making such pronouncements he is thus choosing among different possible continuations of the story and this gives him, in Velleman's view, 'as much free will as a human being' (2006: 218).

What this all means, Velleman concludes, is that in the narrative of Gilbert 'Gilbert' 'is not the name of a self; it's the name of a unified agent who *has* a self, in

the form of an inner locus of agential control' (Velleman 2006: 220–1). So Gilbert is a real self, where a self is understood as something that an agent has by virtue of its agency. Velleman is quick to point out, however, that this understanding of self points to an important difference between his view of the relation of narrative to self and Dennett's. Dennett conceives of a self-narrative as trying to unify an entire life—making 'all of our material cohere into a single good story' (Dennett 1992: 114). Velleman, on the other hand thinks of narratives as extremely local. In his view 'we tell many small, disconnected stories about ourselves—short episodes that do not get incorporated into our life-stories' (Velleman 2006: 222). Self-narration takes place in units 'as small as the eating of a meal, the answering of a phone, or even the scratching of an itch' (Velleman 2006: 222). In this respect, Velleman's view is very different not only from Dennett's, but from all of the views discussed in the first section. Here, even more than in Nelson's view, it is very clear that selfhood has to do with being able to use the devices of narrative to account for what one does, and not with weaving a narrative of one's life as a whole.²

2. COMMONALITIES AND DIFFERENCES

The last section provided a provisional picture of some of the ways in which narrative has been used to investigate and explain the self. In order to get a true

² The views we have discussed so far in one way or another claim that narrative is essential to selfhood. In addition to these there are a great many different kinds of views that see narrative as a particularly useful tool for understanding some crucial aspect of human selves. These views have a great deal to tell us about narrative and the self. In the remainder of this discussion I will put them to one side and focus on views that see narrative as a defining feature of persons. Before moving on it is, however, worth at least mentioning some of these views to give an idea of the range of the work on the narrative self. Hutto (2008) offers the 'Narrative Practice Hypothesis' to explain how humans become adept 'mind readers' using folk psychology to explain and predict the behavior of others. Goldie (2007a, 2007b) describes how novels help us develop the capacity to take an 'external perspective' on others—allowing us to engage with them more effectively—and on ourselves, aiding us in coming to terms with our pasts and planning for our futures. Lindemann Nelson (2001) considers the way in which the narratives that others tell about us can interfere with our autonomy, and how our counter-narratives can help us to regain it, and Lloyd (1993) offers a rich exploration of self and identity in literature and philosophy. There has also been interesting work bringing together narrative perspectives and empirical work. Several theorists have used narrative in discussing pathologies of the self, shedding light on both the pathologies and the nature of the self (e.g. Gallagher 2007). Damasio's (1999) theory of selfhood and consciousness relies heavily on narrative, and Hardcastle (2008) has brought empirical work and narrative theory together to illuminate the mechanisms behind the narrative self. These are just a few examples of views that see narrative as an important concept in understanding the self without holding that selves are intrinsically narrative entities, views that are too many and too complex to explore in a single essay.

appreciation of what the narrative approach has to offer, it is necessary both to respect the very real differences among these views and to recognize what they have in common. This section will draw on the discussion of the last, articulating some of the important similarities and differences that emerged there. The picture of the relations among these views that develops here will be deepened in the next section, where we consider objections to this approach.

Emphasis on meaning and intelligibility

A general commitment of the narrative approach is the idea that the lives of selves cannot be fully described or explained in mechanical or even biological terms. A different kind of explanation is required to capture the truth about selves. More specifically, the lives of selves must be described in ways that make the events and actions in them *meaningful* or *significant* in ways that naturalistic, reductive descriptions cannot. Meaning and significance of the relevant sort are humanistic concepts, not scientific ones, and are related to human goals and projects. This emphasis is front and center in the hermeneutical views, but it is found even in Nelson's preschoolers where, for example, a series of movements is not just a series of movements but a trip to see (for the purpose of seeing) Daddy at work. This emphasis on meaning is a common theme in the narrative approach because narrative is a particularly good way of capturing this dimension of human experience. Events in a story have a kind of meaning that comes from their place in the narrative as a whole, and cannot be completely captured outside of that context, and so narrative produces meaning of the appropriate sort.

There are, however, some important differences in the expression of this theme in different narrative views. Most notably, the notions of 'meaning' and 'significance' are not the same in all of them. The *meaning* of life as hermeneutical theorists understand it is a weighty matter, a question, to use Taylor's term, of whether our lives have 'spiritual significance' (Taylor 1989: 18). It is the kind of meaning someone seeks while embroiled in an existential crisis. In most of the other views, however, 'meaning' has the more mundane sense of intelligibility. In these views meaning need not apply to a life as a whole, but rather to the bits of behavior that make it up—the behavior of MacIntyre's gardener or of Gilbert the robot when he enters the closet. Even in the NSCV and in Dennett's view, where the required narrative spans an entire life and the meaning of individual events comes from the whole of one's life, there is no claim that the life itself, taken as a whole, has some further meaning.

While I have distinguished the grander type of meaning found in hermeneutical views from the mundane intelligibility required by other narrative theorists, defenders of hermeneutical theories would reject this distinction. They hold that the more mundane notion of intelligibility rests upon the stronger one. If there is

no ultimate purpose, they say, nothing that it is all about in the end, then our more mundane purposes are illusory and even the more basic kinds of intelligibility are threatened. In order for our actions to be intelligible at all on this view, we need to find significance in our lives as a whole. This is, naturally, a contentious claim. Most narrative theorists would hold that human action and experience can be made intelligible by being put into a more basic kind of narrative and do not see a need for a life to have an overarching theme or purpose. We may be alienated and unhappy if we think that mundane meaning is all the meaning there is (or we may not), but the act of pulling weeds to keep the garden nice is fully *intelligible* even if we do not think that the garden signifies anything at all in the grand scheme of things.

It is difficult to adjudicate this dispute; in many ways it seems to come down to two fundamentally different pictures of human existence, with some truth in each. It seems obvious that we need not explicitly think of our lives as having overall purpose to find our actions basically intelligible—someone who finds life purposeless or ultimately absurd may still understand that he is walking north to catch the train that will take him to work, even if he does not quite know why he bothers to go. At the same time, there does seem to be some legitimacy to the claim that any local purpose can always be challenged with a further ‘why’ question. (Why is he pulling those plants? To get his garden in shape. Why? To please his wife. Why?, etc.). Mundane intelligibility does seem to require placement in ever broader contexts to produce real intelligibility, and this is something that deserves to be explored and addressed in more detail than it usually is by most narrative theorists.

Normativity, evaluation, agency

Another theme found in almost all narrative views is that selfhood and the narratives that make us selves must involve some level of evaluation and normativity. This theme is directly connected to the one we just discussed. Intelligibility requires an aim or purpose at which action is directed, but purpose requires evaluation—a valued outcome we hope to bring about. Because of this connection, the expression of the demand for an evaluative component of self-narratives varies in something like the way emphasis on meaning did, with hermeneutical narrative theories calling for a stronger form of evaluation than the other views.

In hermeneutical views, ethical orientation is at the heart of selfhood, and the narrative life of the self must be a quest for the good. Other narrative theories allow a much broader understanding of the relevant kind of evaluation, one which is not necessarily tied to ethics or morality in any traditional sense. Velleman, for instance, says Gilbert the robot’s announcement that he is going to the closet gives him *reasons* to go to the closet, since doing so is necessary to keeping his narrative coherent. This makes him an evaluator, a being who can view some

courses of action as preferable to others in a principled way, long before any question of ethics or the good life is brought in. Evaluation enters into the NSCV in much the same way as in Velleman's view. In Nelson's account, simple evaluation is a part of what makes up the narratives of preschoolers, and something that is learnt along with temporal sequencing from listening to the narratives of adults. The trip to visit Daddy is described as 'fun'—an evaluation to be sure, but quite far from any developed consideration of the good.

The dispute described above about whether mundane meaning is possible without deeper meaning is recapitulated in obvious ways with respect to evaluation, and it is similarly inconclusive.³ Still, we see in each version of the narrative approach an emphasis on evaluation, and this is an important characteristic of the approach as a whole. It shows that a core element of the narrative view is an emphasis on choice, value, and agency. However this is understood, it distinguishes the narrative conception from a more Cartesian picture of self as a basically passive experiencing subject. On this approach practical reasoning of some sort is an essential feature of selfhood, and of the meaning that inheres in the lives of selves.

Embeddedness, embodiedness, interactions with others

A feature related to emphasis on evaluation which is also found throughout the narrative approach is an emphasis on the fact that selves are embodied creatures, embedded in a social context in which they interact with others. The idea that selves are agents brings with it the idea that selfhood is something that emerges in a community, further distinguishing the narrative conception of self from the Cartesian picture of an isolated and independent thinking subject. This feature, too, is expressed differently in the different versions of the narrative approach, but in this case the differences may be somewhat more superficial than with the other features.

In the hermeneutical views, we see this feature in the stress put on the necessity of placing oneself in a tradition. There can no more be private meaning in the sense requisite for selfhood, according to these theorists, than there can be a private language according to Wittgenstein, and for many of the same reasons. 'To be a subject of a narrative', MacIntyre says, is 'to be accountable for the actions and experiences which compose a narratable life. It is, that is, to be open to being asked to give a certain kind of account of what one did or what happened to one' (1984: 103). The narrative structure of selfhood also means that one can ask others for an account of what they have done or suffered and expect to receive one. Without such accountability narratives 'would lack the continuity required to make both

³ There is a weaker reading of hermeneutical theories according to which they, also, can allow a broader conception of value or meaning than I have described here. This reading, however, has a cost that we will see when we consider objections to the narrative approach.

them and the actions that constitute them intelligible' (ibid.). Taylor also emphasizes this feature of narrative. A narrative requires a moral framework, and to have these frameworks we must place ourselves in a historical tradition, even if only to react against it. It is for this reason that he says that 'one is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it', adding that 'this obviously cannot be just a contingent matter' (Taylor 1989: 35).

The NSCV places two constraints on self-constituting narratives; the 'articulation constraint', which involves the capability to articulate one's narrative locally where appropriate, and the 'reality constraint', which demands that our narratives fit with the basic conception of reality shared by those in our community (it probably cannot e.g. involve being able to get from Paris to Chicago in one minute). The justification for these constraints is precisely that selfhood requires the ability to engage in certain kinds of characteristic human interactions and this in turn requires that we master our community's understanding of what the life of a self looks like and apply it to ourselves. Selfhood is an essentially social concept here as well. This basic idea is also present in Velleman's view, since it is fundamentally an account of self as agent. This emphasis on embeddedness takes a somewhat different form in Nelson's account, but one that is connected closely with the other views. Nelson emphasizes the need for social scaffolding in developing narratives, and concludes that

narrative emerges from and belongs to the community, but in the individual lives of children it is a vehicle through which consciousness of both self and the wider social and temporal world becomes manifest and gradually emerges as a new subjective level of conscious awareness, with a sense of a specific past and awareness of a possible future, as well as with new insight into the consciousness of other people. (Nelson 2003: 33)

Narrative thus comes from the community and serves as the vehicle through which an individual can interact with it.

In all of these views we see an insistence that one can be a self only by distinguishing oneself from, and interacting with, other selves. One important implication of this embeddedness, as we have seen, is that it puts constraints on our self-narratives. We are not composing the stories of our lives in a vacuum, but in a world where there are others with their own stories about themselves and about us. If narration is going to produce meaning in the way it must for selfhood we need somehow to negotiate the multiple narratives in which we are involved. It is this that leads MacIntyre to caution that: 'we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives. Only in fantasy do we live what story we please' (MacIntyre 1984: 99). Both because our narratives must make reference to the stories available to us from the traditions in which we find ourselves and because they must interact with the realities of the world in which we live and the narratives of others, our narratives must be understood as embedded in a world of other selves.

For Nelson self-narrations are explicit, but this is an artifact of the experimental set-up that tests children for their capacity to offer narrative accounts. The inability to verbally reproduce any part of one's history in narrative form would certainly be taken as evidence that a child has not mastered the necessary cognitive skills, but it is not clear exactly what kind of narration, if any, is supposed to be happening when the child is not telling her story to others. Finally, the NSCV requires that one be able to articulate one's narrative locally where appropriate, but sees narration as a largely implicit process that manifests itself mostly in the quality of our experience and the choices that we make.

It seems safe to say that no narrative view requires that we compose explicit and complete autobiographies in speech, writing, or thought, but that all of them require that we be able at least occasionally to explicitly narrate at least some portion of our lives. Much of our self-narration is expressed in the way we think, the way we live, and the kinds of explanations we feel called upon to give to others. Beyond this, however, it is hard to say anything much more specific about how self-narration is supposed to work. This is, I think, a common frustration with the narrative view, and one to which I will return in discussing objections in the next section.

3. OBJECTIONS TO THE NARRATIVE APPROACH

As the narrative approach has become more widely accepted there has naturally been an increasing number of detractors. Here I will focus on some prominent objections to this approach. They are not the only objections that have been offered, but they are important objections that connect with some of the insights generated in the previous sections.

Strawson's episodic nature and Zahavi's minimal self

Galen Strawson, one of the most famous opponents of narrative views, identifies two strands of the narrative approach. There is what he calls the '*psychological Narrativity thesis*', which holds as a 'straightforwardly empirical, descriptive thesis' that ordinary humans experience their lives in narrative form, and what he calls the '*ethical Narrativity thesis*', which holds that it is a good thing to experience one's life as a narrative—'essential to a well-lived life, to true or full personhood' (Strawson 2004: 428). Strawson rejects both theses. The psychological thesis is, on his view, false, while the ethical thesis is pernicious. Narrative theorists, he surmises, have

How do we tell our narratives?

So far we have looked at themes common to all narrative views and highlighted differences in their expression. Here we find a commonality linked to a common unclarity. The unclarity is associated with the question of whether and how we tell our self-narratives. Narratives are, in the first instance, stories told to an audience. If selves are narrative in structure, we may reasonably ask whether their narratives are told, and if so how, and to whom. Narrative theories seem to differ in their answers to these questions, but because none of them presents an entirely clear answer, it is not obvious how deep these differences run. To see this, consider the question of how our narratives should be expressed as it would be answered by the views we have been discussing.

Hermeneutical theorists see selfhood as consisting in a self-conscious quest for the good. This suggests that the fundamentals of our narratives must be something that we at least tell ourselves. We may not explicitly describe our lives as a narrative or a quest, but if we are not aware of the active attempt to move our lives in the direction of the good we would not, I presume, be selves on this view. Moreover, since the values that underlie our lives as a whole are used in explaining ourselves to others, we must at least sometimes articulate them to these others. Hermeneutical theorists also say that we must enact our narratives; we do not so much *tell* them as live them by engaging in purposive activity that strives for a unified good. So it seems as if, according to these theories, we must explicitly understand our whole lives as a quest for the good, sometimes articulate the values and themes that guide this quest to others, and always express them in our actions. But this is still sketchy and it is not evident what it amounts to in practice. It is not that these theorists do not say anything on this score, only that it is hard to get a clear picture of what they are saying. MacIntyre, for instance, rather unhelpfully tells us that 'the only criteria for success or failure in a human life as a whole are the criteria of success or failure in a narrated or to-be-narrated quest' (1984: 219), but does not tell us anything about what the status 'to-be-narrated' entails.

Dennett presents narratives as something explicitly told. Gilbert the robot either says or writes everything that happens, just as Melville writes down all of the events that make up Ishmael's story. It is by no means evident, however, that Dennett envisions narration being similarly articulated in human lives. In his discussion of Sybil, as we have seen, he suggests that one's narrative can be expressed in action as well as in words. It is clear that Dennett sees our brains as spinning narratives, but it is less clear just how and when (or if) these narratives are told and to what audience. Velleman's reinterpretation of Dennett is similarly mysterious. Who, for instance, is the audience of my narrative of my scratching an itch or eating a meal? Presumably narratives are enacted in life for Velleman, but since reasoning often involves explicit narration, there must be some of that as well.

based their views on introspection, assuming that the way they arrange their experiences is the way everyone else does or that the kind of life that works well for them will work well for everybody. This assumption is unwarranted, Strawson argues, and he offers himself as a counterexample to universalized narrative claims about the self. Describing himself as an 'Episodic' he says that he has 'absolutely no sense of [his] life as a narrative with form, or indeed as a narrative without form. Absolutely none.' He asserts, moreover, that he is able to live a perfectly rich, full, and meaningful life without such a narrative and suggests that views that demand that everyone strive for a narrative self-experience, 'close down important avenues of thought, impoverish our grasp of ethical possibilities, needlessly and wrongly distress those who do not fit their model, and are potentially destructive in psychotherapeutic contexts' (Strawson 2004: 429).

In explicating this claim Strawson draws a distinction between 'one's experience of oneself when one is considering oneself principally as a human being taken as a whole, and one's experience of oneself when one is considering oneself principally as an inner mental entity or "self" of some sort' (Strawson 2004: 429). Strawson uses self* (and the corresponding I*, you*, he*) to designate this inner mental entity. He recognizes that he* has a special relation to the other selves that have inhabited the body of Galen Strawson (GS), but sees himself* as a different experiencing subject: 'I'm well aware that my past is mine in so far as I am a human being, and I fully accept that there is a sense in which it has special relevance to me* now. At the same time I have no sense that I* was there in the past, and think it is obvious that I* was not there, as a matter of metaphysical fact' (Strawson 2004: 434). His self, he holds, is episodic in nature, and not part of any ongoing narrative.

Much of Strawson's account of his episodic nature is a denial that his life has any overall theme or moral unity of the sort required by the hermeneutical narrative view. Since this analysis does not apply to all versions of the narrative view, it is most useful to think of Strawson's challenge as presenting a dilemma for narrative theorists. The dilemma is roughly this: either narrative views are too demanding to be plausible or they are not 'narrative' in any interesting sense. That is, either the narrative view really demands that our lives and self-understandings are like literature in some strong sense or it does not. If it is the former Strawson's Episodic self serves as a counterexample; if the latter, it risks triviality. As Strawson puts it, 'if someone says, as some do, that making coffee is a Narrative that involves Narrativity, because you have to think ahead, do things in the right order, and so on, and that everyday life involves many such narratives, then I take it the claim is trivial' (Strawson 2004: 439).

Hermeneutical theorists obviously fall on the first horn of the dilemma. A possible response for these theorists is to claim that Strawson's Episodic nature does not, in fact, serve as a counterexample to the narrative view because episodicity as he depicts it is in fact narrative. In describing himself as an Episodic, these theorists

might argue, Strawson precisely tells us something about his deeper nature and the values that shape his life as a whole. He asserts, for instance, that 'truly happy-go-lucky, see-what-comes-along lives are among the best there are, vivid, blessed, profound' (Strawson 2004: 449). 'Blessed' and 'profound' certainly sound like ethical terms. These theorists might thus argue that Strawson has misunderstood the nature of narrative in claiming that his life is non-narrative. The free spirit is a recognizable character from literature, as Strawson himself reveals by using the character Tom Bombadil from *The Lord of the Rings* as an example of such a being (Strawson 2004: 449 n. 49). Looking to be free from stifling thematic unity is something that the hermeneutical view can recognize as a quest. The NSCV can follow a similar strategy, arguing that the way in which Strawson recognizes all of the actions and experiences of GS as having implications for how things are for him* and for what he must do is all that is required for a self-narrative.

Strawson might argue that these replies throw these theorists to the other horn of the dilemma. If Strawson's episodic orientation and his recognition of certain facts about his connection to the history of GS qualify as having a narrative, he might say, then a narrative is something we cannot help but have and the claim that it is something we must have if our lives are to be meaningful seems to lose much of its force. This in itself is not a problem since most narrative theorists would accept the claim that we cannot but have a narrative; in some ways that is their very point. But if any set of preferences counts as an ethical orientation or a quest for a good, the claim that someone has a self-narrative in even the strongest sense proposed seems to collapse into a claim that selves have some set of characteristics and need a basic understanding of the unfolding of events, and this does seem trivial.

This brings us to the second horn of the dilemma. If we are going to allow that a self-narrative need not have the characteristics of a literary work we have to explain in what sense it is a *narrative*, and to do so in a way that makes the claims of the narrative approach non-trivial. Narrative theorists do have something to say in response here. As we have seen, the claim that selves are narrative in structure is minimally a claim that there is a form of explanation necessary to describing human lives that does not reduce to physical or biological explanation and gives events and actions significance. There is a way in which human actions hang together that is characteristic and purposive. As Anthony Rudd puts it in his response to Strawson, the claim 'that the understanding of even simple human actions must take a narrative form is, I would suggest, by no means a trivial point, given the continuing influence of rival, scientific models of action-explanation' (Rudd 2009: 63).⁴ It is by no means obvious that the claims of narrative theorists

⁴ Rudd goes on to claim that he thinks that the real concern is with whether these mundane narratives imply that one's life as a whole is narrative in form. He argues that they indeed do, employing the kind of strategy described earlier of claiming that local intelligibility ultimately requires broader context.

become trivial as soon as they allow life narratives to deviate from literary form. Still, as our earlier discussion already revealed, and as I shall discuss further below, it would be useful for the approach as a whole to have a clearer expression of what characterizes narrative and how it differs from other explanatory forms.

There is, I think, another kind of disagreement between Strawson and narrative theorists that stands behind the differences already described. It seems sometimes less as if Strawson and narrative theorists disagree on how to explain the phenomenon of self, and more that they disagree on what that phenomenon is. For Strawson self is defined in terms of subjectivity alone; the entire dimension of agency and embeddedness is left out of the equation (see Chapter 10 above). This points to a whole new set of questions for the narrative theorist. Self-consciousness, reflexivity, and the capacity to know oneself as oneself are crucial elements of the self on the narrative approach, but it is not always evident where the brute phenomenological experience of oneself as a self distinct from others fits into the whole picture, and this is another lacuna.

This concern also emerges in Dan Zahavi's complaint that narrative theories are incomplete because they fail to recognize a core component of selfhood, namely the fundamental, given mineness that is part of the structure of all experience. This 'primitive self', described in the work of phenomenologists, is 'conceived as the invariant dimension of first-personal givenness in the multitude of changing experiences' (Zahavi 2007: 189). Zahavi does not deny that narrative organization of experience can be very important to us and is part of our selfhood but it cannot, he says, be all of selfhood. Without narrative we can still have brute first-personal experience, but without the phenomenology of the first-personal there is no narrative. 'None of the narrative theories... even come near to being able to explain how first-personal givenness could be brought about by narrative structures but', he says, 'this failure is not really surprising, since the reverse happens to be the case' (Zahavi 2007: 200). The claim that narrative is not required for selfhood, found in both Strawson and Zahavi, can thus be seen as the claim that what narrative adds (complex interactions with others, meaningful experience) are at most enrichments of an already existing self. A self, on this view, is a self-conscious entity that is the kind of thing that might care about the nature of its life and interactions, and narrative comes in after the self already exists.

One way to respond to these worries is to allow that there are many uses of the term 'self' and that narrative theorists are defining only one of these. There is, however, a much more interesting line of response. A narrative theorist might argue that the kind of phenomenological self-consciousness that makes a self is a qualitatively different *kind* of consciousness than the brute first-personal awareness we presumably share with many animals, and that this different kind of consciousness requires narrative. The idea would be that the character (and not just the content) of first-personal experience is different for self-narrators than for non-narrators. Something like this is suggested, for instance, in Nelson's talk

of a new level of self-consciousness that emerges when we learn to narrate. This is an intriguing possibility, and I believe that the empirical work in evolutionary and developmental psychology has much to offer in considering whether it is defensible.⁵

Strawson and Zahavi thus do not offer completely devastating criticisms of the narrative approach; narrative theorists can respond to most of their objections. Nevertheless, they do point out important places where narrative theorists are unclear about the exact nature of their claims and points where the approach could be further developed. In particular, we have seen a need to get clearer on the essential features of narrative explanation and on the role of phenomenology and self-consciousness in the narrative approach.

Lamarque and literary narrative

A second major objection comes from Peter Lamarque who argues that narrative theories of the self take the analogy between life and literature too seriously in a way that threatens to mislead us about both. A core feature of literature, he says, is that the manner in which a story is presented is of the utmost importance. When we are trying to understand a piece of literature we look at the language in which the story is told. We assume that the details of the story—the color of a hair-ribbon, a seemingly accidental encounter—are serving some artistic purpose, and we look for symbolism, foreshadowing, and other literary devices in interpreting their meaning. To think of our lives as genuinely like literature we thus need to do one of two things; either we must reduce literature to plot and character—as if the details of presentation do not really matter—or we must think of our lives as full of purpose and meaning at every turn—as if the accidents and coincidences that befall us are really by design. ‘The more we try to restore the distinctively literary features of [canonical literary] narratives the more remote they become from real life’, he says. ‘Indeed a stronger point can be made. To the extent that literary features are brought to bear on real-life narratives they have a distorting and pernicious effect on the self-understanding that such narratives are supposed to yield’ (Lamarque 2007: 119).

⁵ I have also suggested such a connection (see e.g. Schechtman 1996: 149–62; 2004). More recently I have offered a response to Strawson, acknowledging that the NSCV equivocates on whether the unity of self consists in a strong phenomenological connection of the sort Strawson sees as constituting the self and a weaker kind of narrative connection of the sort that unifies his understanding of the continuity of the life of GS. But I also explore the possibility that there are deeper connections between these two notions than may at first appear. While this is not exactly on the point of whether the quality of self-consciousness is affected by narrative, it is not unrelated (Schechtman 2007).

To underscore this point, Lamarque looks at how literary critics work. These critics dissect the language and details of presentation in a novel, showing how literary devices are employed by authors to communicate the themes and insights that lie behind the events of narratives. It is not even clear what it would mean to take a similar stance with respect to one's own life, he points out. Lives just have a different logic than constructed works of fiction because they are not works of art. If we take 'the great literary works to be models for our self-directed narratives,' he thus concludes, 'we are prone to two serious mistakes' (Lamarque 2007: 132). The less serious is 'to suppose that literary works are simply stories about people like you and me, a species of real life narratives'. The more serious and potentially dangerous mistake is 'to suppose that our own life narratives are mini-works of literature complying with the principles of literary appreciation'. This mistake is potentially dangerous because it invokes a 'false image of ourselves as kinds of fictional characters, whose identity rests on narrative description and whose actions are explicable in functional, teleological or thematic ways' (Lamarque 2007: 132).

Lamarque's concerns, like Strawson's, apply most straightforwardly to the hermeneutical narrative views. Still, insofar as all narrative views make the claim that the lives of persons are characterized by meaning, and insofar as Lamarque's claim is that the kind of significance events in our lives have is vastly different from the kind that events in narratives do, his criticism applies to them all. I will begin by considering how defenders of hermeneutical views might reply, and from there we will be able to see how this response can be more broadly applied.

It is important to note first that the question of the correspondence of life to literature is one about which hermeneutical theorists are themselves divided. MacIntyre allows some differences between life and literature (the fact that we can at most co-author our lives), but is clear that he sees them as essentially the same in structure. As we have seen, Ricoeur differs from MacIntyre on this issue, seeing differences between life and literature very like those Lamarque does (Ricoeur 1994: 159–61). Ricoeur does not see these differences as undermining the narrative approach, however. These difficulties, he says, 'do not seem to me to be such as to abolish the very option of the *application* of fiction to life. The objections are valid only in opposition to a naive conception of *mimēsis*.' He goes on to say 'these are less to be refuted than to be incorporated in a more subtle, more dialectical comprehension of *appropriation*' (ibid. 161–2). Ricoeur's suggestive response to the differences between life and literature is to define selfhood in terms of the negotiation of these differences.

Using Ricoeur's basic insight as inspiration, we can devise a strategy for responding to Lamarque that both illuminates the narrative approach and points to a direction for further development. To begin, let's separate three different roles with respect to narrative: those of character, author, and critic (or reader). In discussing the difference between life and literature, Lamarque focuses most

directly on the perspective of the critic. He suggests that a critic looking at a piece of literature should assume she is dealing with an artifact whose meaning is best determined by presupposing that the details are non-accidental and therefore all potentially significant.⁶ This is so because it is assumed that the author, who builds the narrative out of whole cloth, chooses each detail for some aesthetic purpose—to symbolize a major theme, move the plot along, develop characters, and so on. From the point of view of the author, then, decisions about what to include must be made with such purposes in mind. From the point of view of the characters in a novel, on the other hand, there are plenty of accidents and contingencies, as Lamarque himself points out in discussing the accident at the beginning of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. If the question is what caused Tess's accident 'the answer, within the fictional world, is that she fell asleep and was run into by the mail-cart' (Lamarque 2007: 125). From the perspective of the literary critic, on the other hand, the answer is that the accident lays out the themes of the entire novel.

Lamarque's complaint is that our lives are not everywhere filled with purpose and design, but are rather driven by accident, contingency, and coincidence. We might put this by saying that narrative theorists, on his view, suggest we should take the perspective of the critic and/or author on our own lives, when in fact the only accurate perspective is that which would be taken by a character within a fictional world. The kinds of explanations that apply to our lives are the kind Tess would give of her accident, not the kind a critic would, and only the latter is rife with the kind of significance narrative theorists are after. But we may ask if narrative theorists really do suggest that we take only the attitude of critic. The version that comes closest to doing so is, again, that offered by hermeneutical theorists, and even they do not say we should take the perspective of critic or even author to the *exclusion* of the perspective of character. It is perhaps better to think of these views as saying, as Ricoeur implies, that what is unique to selves is that they must take all of these perspectives.

We must view our lives on the level of a character internal to a fictional world insofar as successful selfhood requires us to acknowledge that we are at best co-authors of our own lives and that we are constrained by the facts about the social and natural world in which we find ourselves. But we must also take the perspective of authors because we are not just moved about by causal forces and there is no author outside of us who will directly push our story forward. While we do not make our lives up out of nothing, finding ourselves in the world we are also confronted with the question of what to do next. We cannot always decide any way we wish, and we are never guaranteed that things will go as we plan, but we must think of ourselves as authors of our lives insofar as we must make decisions

⁶ I will not engage in disputes about the nature of criticism, which are not directly germane to the central point here, but will operate with the view I take to be Lamarque's.

and these must involve reasons or purposes. Insofar as we are agents, we are partial authors of our lives. We are also critics, reflecting on our lives. When we do take the role of critic in our own life, however, we must do so with an understanding of the kind of authorship involved, looking for significance of an accident, for instance, in the choices that led to it and the responses it engenders, rather than in the fact that it occurred.

The three roles we have been describing are only artificially separated in human life. As critics we interpret what has happened so far in a way that impacts the future authorship of our lives, and as characters we enact those choices and have the experiences that generate the significance we appreciate as critics. For narrative theorists we are beings who generate meaning in our own lives by finding meaning in the unfolding of events, intending actions we find meaningful, and living according to the meanings we have found. We enter into ongoing stories, stories we must interpret and continue, and these functions are in constant interaction with one another. Life is different from literature because we write it as we live it and engage in criticism as we go along rather than after the fact, and because this forces us to take on different roles and perspectives. The creative act in narrative self-constitution is thus neither to produce a tidy and meaningful story out of whole cloth nor to take accidents and contingencies and arbitrarily interpret them as meaningful. It is rather to carve out a meaningful life trajectory by appreciating the contingencies, considering how to respond to them meaningfully, and directing life so much as possible in the direction of that meaning.

This, I think, is why these theorists have so much difficulty giving a clear account of exactly how narration occurs in actual lives; it occurs in different ways at different levels all at once. Having seen this we may wonder whether some of the differences among narrative views might be largely attributable to different levels of emphasis on the different roles. Views that think of the self in terms of mundane narratives that track the events that befall one emphasize the way in which we are characters in our narratives and, to a lesser extent, critics. Velleman's view of selves as agents emphasizes our role as authors, but of course we must be characters and critics to be agents in this way as well. The hermeneutical views emphasize our role as critics more than some of the other views do, and Nelson's view is more concerned with how we gain the basic capacities necessary to negotiate the different roles. The proponents of these views might well reject this suggestion. It is, nevertheless, an intriguing possibility to see the fundamental insight of the narrative approach as the claim that selves are beings who negotiate the roles of character, author, and critic in their own lives, and that the unique kind of meaning or significance found in human lives comes from just that fact.

4. CONCLUSION

We have seen that the narrative approach is made up of a wide array of different kinds of views addressed to different questions. We have also seen that perhaps at bottom these views share a similar insight—namely that the complexity of selves is to be found in the multiple perspectives on our lives that we negotiate in living them, a complexity best understood in narrative terms. This is a promising insight at many levels, but much work remains to develop its full potential. The chief difficulties facing narrative theories revolve around making the idea that the self is narrative concrete—What, exactly, counts as a narrative in this context? Where do self-narratives reside, how explicitly must they be articulated, and to whom? Where do the phenomenological aspects of selfhood fit in?

Thinking about the narrative self in terms of the interplay between the three narrative roles provides a strategy for beginning to answer these questions and the promise of a more fleshed-out narrative view, one with the potential to define a being complex enough to appear contingently in the seat next to you on a long plane flight, to amuse, distract, or annoy you with the stories of his life, and in so doing to alter the course of your own.

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PART V

ACTION AND THE
MORAL
DIMENSIONS OF
THE SELF
